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AGASSIZ CENTENNIAL

REMARKS OF

CHARLES WILLIAM ELIOT

LADIES and Gentlemen: Mr. Dana in opening this meeting spoke of the Saturday Club and of Agassiz as a member. His words reminded me of the only occasion when I ever heard a speech made at that Club. I have been a member of it now about thirty-five years, and only on this one occasion did I ever hear a speech made there. It was when Agassiz, who at that time always sat at the foot of the table, was going away on that long voyage of the *Hassler* round Cape Horn. At the head of the table sat Longfellow, as usual, and along the sides sat many of the men just mentioned by Mr. Dana. Near the close of the dinner Longfellow suddenly rose, and to our great astonishment said,—“Our dear friend Agassiz is going away; he is going on a long voyage in the hope of recovering his health; we shall miss him grievously; we shall welcome him back most thankfully, restored to health. Let us drink his health now.” And we all got up except Agassiz, and drank his health; and then he rose and struggled to say something, and could not; and finally the tears rolled down his cheeks and he sat down speechless. It was a vivid instance of a characteristic quality in Agassiz, namely, the strength of his emotions. He was a man of strong and deep emotions, and his influence over us restrained, reserved Americans was largely due to the intensity of his feelings, and to the way in which his face and body expressed those feelings.

He was, as has been repeatedly said here this evening, a born

teacher and expositor. He expounded clearly and sympathetically before any audience the fundamental principles of his science, and gave examples illustrating the principles with both hands, and with shining, smiling face. He was just that,—a teacher by nature, an enthusiastic, earnest, moving teacher.

As Professor Gray has just said, he came into this Puritan society like a warm glow into a chilly room. He was a revolutionary spirit in Harvard College, an exception to all our rules. He welcomed special students, for instance, who could not possibly pass the examinations for admission to Harvard College. He kept them for years in his laboratory, training them in his observational method,—quite a new introduction among us. Many of our best people disapproved of that method! The son of one of our most distinguished surgeons submitted himself to the teaching of Agassiz in the crude zoölogical laboratory, and received several trilobites upon which he was expected to spend weeks,—examining them, seeing what he could discover in them, and making a record of his discoveries. He was kept at this sort of work for weeks without a book, and without plates. He was to make his own plates. At last the son described this process to the father as novel and interesting, but difficult. Now that father was at bottom a naturalist, like every physician or surgeon, and yet he said,—“What! no book, no plates, no guidance from the wisdom of all preceding generations! Set just to use your own senses on those fossils!” “Yes,” said the son, “that was the whole of it.” “Well,” said the father, “that is exactly the way a puppy has to learn everything.” The criticism was a real one; the father thought that Agassiz was neglecting all the natural and proper aids which past time had placed at the service of human youth.

And then, what a new kind of professor Agassiz was in this old town! He had none of the regular habits of the traditional Harvard professor. He did not even wear the characteristic black clothes. He would cross the College Yard any day of the week, at any hour of the day, in a soft, grey felt hat, smoking a cigar when to smoke in the College Yard was a grave offence. He never went to church. Sunday was his day of rest, but he did not take it in the New England fashion. His mode of lecturing was

unexampled among us. His conception of the duty of a professor to investigate, to discover, to collect, we had only noticed faintly in a few exceptional American teachers. Those methods had been introduced in small measure among us; but those were the prime ideas of Agassiz as a professor and a teacher.

There were but two pitiful little collections in the possession of the University when Agassiz first came here,— a collection of minerals, imperfect, small, and never properly arranged, and the beginnings of a botanic garden and herbarium. The idea of making great collections of natural history objects hardly existed among us; we had hardly aspired to such collections.

And then, he raised such astonishing sums of money for these new subjects of zoölogy and geology. A good deal of jealousy about this extraordinary money-raising was felt by members of other departments long established in Cambridge for the traditional subjects of collegiate instruction. I remember one night at my uncle Mr. George Ticknor's, hearing this jealousy expressed by one of Professor Agassiz's colleagues in Harvard University. But Mr. Ticknor said,— "Don't be alarmed; Agassiz will get more money out of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for his subjects than any of you have dreamed of getting, than any of you could possibly get; but he will so equip his subject, he will set such a standard for collections in all subjects, that every department of learning in the University will profit by his achievements." That is just what has turned out to be the truth.

Agassiz founded here an institution; and he has had this unusual felicity,— that his son, an extraordinary naturalist and an extraordinary man of business, has built up with prodigious skill and liberality the institution which his father founded. That, I say, is a rare felicity.

Every teacher who is eminently successful as teacher, inspirer, and enthusiast, wins another sort of felicity in time. He brings up a group of disciples, and these disciples carry their master's teaching beyond their master's own range, and adapt his teachings to the new conditions which rapidly come about in science,— indeed, in all kinds of learning and working, and in modern society as a whole. That felicity Agassiz has enjoyed,— a beautiful felicity, a rare reward.

So we welcome this commemoration of a great teacher and a noble friend, and we say with Longfellow at the Saturday Club,—
We miss him greatly, but we rejoice in his coming back to us in durable memory, and in the infinite ramifications of his personal influence.

CAMBRIDGE. 27 MAY '07